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Human Rights Council 24th session
Half-day panel discussion on the World Conference on
Indigenous Peoples



Opening remarks
by
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for Human Rights

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Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva

Mr. President,
Excellences,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to open this panel and to welcome the distinguished representatives of indigenous peoples and other panelists to a timely and important discussion on the High Level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly to be known as the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples.

Today's panel is not only an occasion to highlight the significance of the World Conference to be held in September 2014, but also an opportunity to explore how to make sure that the process and the outcome of the Conference yield concrete results, results that resonate well beyond New York and Geneva and truly improve the lives and advance the rights of indigenous peoples, including women and children.

Over the years, there have been several landmark events advancing the efforts to place the rights of indigenous peoples firmly on the UN agenda. These have ranged from the first international NGO conference of indigenous peoples on UN premises, held here in Palais des Nations in 1977 (and marked just last week with a colloquium) to the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples by General Assembly in 2007. I am confident that if we all – representatives of States, indigenous peoples, UN, regional organisations and others – work hard in a true, constructive partnership, the World Conference will become such a landmark.

The first steps have been promising. The World Conference preparatory process has already inspired innovations and generated energy and enthusiasm that bode well for the event itself. For example, the importance of ensuring that the World Conference is not only *about* indigenous peoples but prepared *with* them has

been repeatedly underlined by this Council and others. This commitment was also reflected in a commendable decision of the President of General Assembly to appoint an indigenous co-facilitator, John Henriksen of the Sami Parliament of Norway, who joins this panel today, to conduct with Ambassador Luis Alfonso de Alba of Mexico first consultations with governments and indigenous peoples on the World Conference. We have also been pleased to see how indigenous peoples from all regions have organised themselves and actively engaged in the process, including through the Indigenous Global Coordinating Group, which is represented in this panel by Ms Tania Pariona. The Global Indigenous Preparatory Conference - organised in Alta, Norway, in June of this year - was a prime example of this engagement, resulting in a substantial and detailed outcome document. At OHCHR, we are also committed to advancing participation of indigenous peoples in the World Conference and its preparatory process, including by ensuring direct support to such participation through the UN Voluntary Fund on Indigenous Populations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Robust indigenous participation in the World Conference process is essential not only as a reflection of the rights contained in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and other human rights texts, but also to ensure that the Conference addresses those themes, issues and challenges that are truly priorities for indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples have already put forward a number of valuable recommendations in this respect, including calls to address such key themes as land rights and the principle of free, prior and informed consent. Important proposals have also been made in recent sessions of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and I am pleased that both bodies are represented in this panel (by, respectively, Chief Wilton Littlechild and Mr Devasish Roy).

Virtually all key themes and issues proposed so far have an important human rights dimension, linked to the standards contained in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and human rights treaties. Human rights must therefore be at the heart of the World Conference. I am confident that this panel as well as preparatory meetings such the one to be hosted by the Government Mexico will help us reach that goal.

In its modalities resolution, the General Assembly decided that the World Conference shall result in “a concise, action oriented outcome document”. In line with this commitment, we must work towards an outcome that goes beyond reaffirming the importance of the rights of indigenous peoples and identifying good practices and challenges that remain in this respect; it must also prompt enhanced *action* to meet these challenges, *action* to implement the Declaration and other key standards.

Since the adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, we have seen such action in a number of countries in all regions. New laws and policies devoted to indigenous peoples have been introduced, in several cases coupled with mechanisms facilitating the participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making. Often neglected issues, including discrimination and other human rights problems faced by indigenous women and persons with disabilities, have also received increased attention. Progress has been achieved in all regions, including where conceptual challenges have at times complicated efforts to advance indigenous peoples’ rights, and I look forward to learning from Ms Soyata Maiga, the Chair of the Working Group on Indigenous Populations/Communities of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights, how this work is being pursued in Africa.

You can see numerous examples of such positive initiatives in the report that the Expert Mechanism, with support from OHCHR, prepared for this session of the Human Rights Council on best practices and implementation strategies to attain the goals of the Declaration. At the same time, the report, together with many findings of treaty bodies and other human rights mechanisms, shows that only a limited number of States have introduced comprehensive strategies or national action plans devoted to the implementation of the Declaration. In many cases, implementation measures introduced cover only some, selected provisions of the Declaration, and the approach pursued is at times more *ad hoc* than strategic. The rights contained in the Declaration are so interdependent and interrelated that their realization requires comprehensive approaches and action. For example, efforts to implement the right to culture are likely to fail if land rights are ignored; indigenous peoples' right to participate in decision-making will never be fully realized without efforts to combat discrimination against indigenous women; and true progress in fields ranging from education to language rights requires respect for indigenous peoples' right to self-determination.

The World Conference would be an excellent opportunity to encourage the introduction of such comprehensive approaches through implementation strategies and/or action plans, to be developed, implemented and monitored in close partnership with indigenous peoples. They can be pursued as separate initiatives or as a component of the human rights action plans or action plans against racial discrimination, as long as all the rights contained in the Declaration and the specific human rights challenges faced by indigenous peoples receive focused attention and action.

Our office, together with its partners, stands ready to support the development of such strategies and action plans, as we have successfully done, for example,

in the context of national action plans to combat racism, called for by the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The World Conference is also an opportunity to examine and advance the engagement of the United Nations in the area of indigenous peoples' rights, in line with Articles 41 and 42 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which call upon the various components of the United Nations system to contribute to and promote the full realization of the rights affirmed in the Declaration.

We can celebrate many achievements in this respect. Thanks to the tireless advocacy of indigenous representatives and their allies and partners in governments and elsewhere, indigenous peoples' rights have gradually moved from obscurity to visibility in the UN, and the adoption of the Declaration has further stimulated this process. Consider, for example, that

- indigenous peoples' rights are today regularly raised in human rights mechanisms, including in the UPR process, human rights treaty bodies and special procedures

- three UN mandates devoted to indigenous peoples are actively engaging states and indigenous peoples to promote the Declaration and other standards

- OHCHR and other UN agencies are working closely together, and with indigenous peoples, both at headquarters and in the field, to advance indigenous peoples' rights, including through the inter-agency support group and the UN Indigenous Peoples Partnership Initiative (UNIPP).

As we celebrate these and other steps, we must also acknowledge that indigenous peoples' rights could, and should, be embedded even more firmly in

the work of the United Nations. The World Conference can provide an important boost to these efforts, and encourage attention to indigenous peoples in the post-2015 development agenda and other key contexts. The Alta outcome document suggests various new initiatives and mechanisms aimed to bolster such work within the UN. But as we study proposals for new tools, let us also consider how we can make the existing mechanisms stronger, ensuring that their profile and, most importantly, positive impact on human rights are maximized. As far as human rights specific mechanisms are concerned, the World Conference process could, for example, help to galvanize further support to the crucial work of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of indigenous Peoples and the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and stimulate more consistent follow-up to their findings. It can also help to boost inter-agency initiatives on indigenous peoples, so that they will live up to their full potential, filling knowledge and capacity gaps that still exist within the UN system and advancing indigenous peoples' rights, including at the field level.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The World Conference is a tremendous opportunity which we need to seize together. With the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as our road map, let us proceed with a shared purpose and commitment to prepare in the next 12 months a World Conference that will take our work *on* and *with* indigenous peoples to a new level.

Thank you for your attention.
